

Title:

AN EXPLORATION INTO WHAT PROMOTES OR HINDERS BENEFICIAL
ENGLISH TEST WASHBACK
ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

By Martin Murray

Student number: 0039713437

Principal Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Shirley O'Neill

Associate Supervisors: Dr. Sang-Soon Park (from 2012)
Dr. Kathryn Young (before 2012)

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Faculty of Education,
University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

Ethical English language testing requires an ongoing effort to improve the quality of English test item design. It also requires the identification of what factors might encourage or obstruct positive washback and impact. The advantages and disadvantages of summative high-stakes English tests compared to feasible alternative forms of assessment should also be considered. For instance, an evaluative review of this research suggests the greater appropriateness of multiple medium-stakes formative English assessments over high-stakes summative English tests for students at the case study school. This case study explores the washback phenomenon and related impact phenomenon at one CMI (Chinese Medium of Instruction) secondary school in Hong Kong in order to find out what promotes or hinders beneficial English test washback and impact on teaching and learning at this school and includes a comparison between a new and a long established high-stakes English test. Another focus of this research is the lower academic performance and lower English language proficiency levels of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. A total of 256 student participants completed questionnaires; 147 student participants took part in group interviews; and 7 teacher participants took part in individual interviews. A total of 23 lesson observations occurred as well as one English SBA (School-based Assessment) assessing session and one group tutorial. Key findings include a crucial need for English teachers who prepare students for high-stakes English tests to be aware of what pedagogical practices will maximise their students' chances of success in what can be a very stressful and even traumatic experience. Some examples of detrimental washback and impact were identified including some instances of narrowing of the curriculum and some instances of an increased focus on lower order cognitive skills such as rote learning and memorisation. Examples of beneficial washback and impact were identified including some instances of a wide variety of English learning experiences being encouraged and much enhanced both by English teachers who knew how to scaffold their students' use of lower and higher order cognitive skills in ways that encouraged a creative use of English and English SBA (School-based Assessment). Finally, English SBA (School-based Assessment) was found to be a much sharper tool and to have a more immediate ability to enhance the quality of English teaching and the learning experiences of students by more actively engaging students in the learning process than high-stakes English tests.

Keywords: CMI; EFL; high-stakes tests; impact; measurement-driven instruction; washback

CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the work contained in this dissertation is entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate

Date

ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Supervisor/s

Date

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Acronyms

AS-level Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary Level Examination

CE Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination

CLT Communicative Language Teaching

CMI Chinese Medium of Instruction

EDB Hong Kong Education Bureau, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

EFL English as a Foreign Language

ELT English Language Teaching

EMI English Medium of Instruction

EQ Emotional Intelligence

ETS Educational Testing Service

HKALE Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (AS-level) Advanced Supplementary Level Use of English Examination

HKCEE Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination English Language Examination

HKDSE Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education English Language Examination

HKEAA Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority

HREC Human Research Ethics Committee

IELTS International English Language Testing System

LET Local English Teacher (Usually a Hong Kong Chinese English Teacher who is a native Cantonese-speaking teacher of English)

MOI Medium of Instruction

NET Native-speaking English Teacher (employed by the school through EDB NET Scheme)

NMET National Matriculation English Test (China)

NVivo 9 Software that helps researchers manage, analyze and report on unstructured data like interviews, websites, images, videos and social media posts

P1/2/3/4/5/6 Primary 1/2/3/4/5/6

PASW Statistics SPSS PASW Statistics 18 (formerly SPSS Statistics) is an advanced statistical analysis software

S1/2/3/4/5/6/7 Secondary 1/2/3/4/5/6/7

SBA (School-based Assessment) (included in HKDSE examination results after HKEAA moderation)

TOEFL Test of English as an International Language (a trademark of ETS)

USQ University of Southern Queensland (Australia)

Synonyms

The words *examination*; *exam* and *test* are used interchangeably and are intended to convey exactly the same meaning as each other.

The terms *positive washback* and *beneficial washback* are used interchangeably and are intended to convey exactly the same meaning as each other.

The terms *negative washback* and *detrimental washback* are used interchangeable and are intended to convey exactly the same meaning as each other.

The HKALE is sometimes also referred to as the *old* examination, exam or test.

The HKCEE is sometimes also referred to as the *old certificate* examination, exam or test

The HKDSE is sometimes also referred to as the *new* examination, exam or test.